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PROGRAM Morning Edition STATION WAMU-FM  
NPR Network

DATE September 24, 1982 6:30 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Intelligence Reporting in Central America

CARL KASELL: The House Intelligence Committee released a 47-page report yesterday criticizing certain aspects of American intelligence reporting on Central America. NPR's Bill Buzenberg says that the House study found serious lapses in the objectivity of some intelligence reports.

BILL BUZENBERG: The issue raised by the House report is this: Has the Reagan Administration's tough policy on Central America skewed intelligence reporting on that region? American intelligence agencies would answer no. But the report by the House Oversight and Evaluation Subcommittee says yes, in some instances.

Subcommittee Chairman Charles Rose of North Carolina says their findings were released yesterday over the objections of intelligence agencies in order to prod them in public.

REP. CHARLES ROSE: We generally give them nothing but praise. But on occasion we find some things that we think need to be corrected.

BUZENBERG: What needs to be corrected, Rose says, are instances where intelligence reporting on Central America appear to bend to Administration policy.

REP. ROSE: There were some overstatements, some oversimplifications, some almost misinformation in some cases, that if continued could fall into a pattern of having the policymakers driving the intelligence, rather than the intelligence being independent.

BUZENBERG: Three examples cited in the House report:

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First, last March the CIA briefed Congress and reporters on the military buildup in Nicaragua. The emphasis in those briefings, as former Deputy CIA Director Bobby Inman said at the time, was on the Nicaraguan Army's capability to launch offensive operations outside their country.

DEPUTY DIRECTOR BOBBY INMAN: This is vastly beyond any defensive need for Nicaragua for the military capabilities of all the surrounding countries combined.

BUZENBERG: The House report says that while publicly playing up the offensive nature of the Nicaraguan buildup, the reasoned judgment of most intelligence agencies privately suggested the Nicaraguans did not intend offensive actions. That assessment was classified.

Example number two. Last March a Stanford anthropology student named Philip Bourgeois told reporters about being inadvertently caught in a Salvadoran Army assault on civilians.

PHILIP BOURGEOIS: It was the cries of the babies -- the babies started crying -- that attracted the Salvadorian Army's fire right to us, if you can imagine that. They were shooting at the sound of the crying babies. It wasn't as if they mistook us for guerrillas or anything like that.

BUZENBERG: In briefings at the time, according to the House report, U.S. intelligence agencies suggested that Bourgeois was part of a guerrilla propaganda campaign, and at the time of the incident he was with a guerrilla fighting unit, not a group of civilians. The House report found that was misleading. In fact, intelligence agencies had no evidence that Bourgeois was not telling the truth or to contradict his claim that he was with noncombatants.

Example number three. Last January, on the eve of President Reagan's first certification about progress on human rights in El Salvador, news reports told about a massacre of from 700 to 900 civilians in El Masote (?) province. Thomas Enders, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, went before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February to say that the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador had studied that incident and reached this conclusion.

THOMAS ENDERS: Civilians did die, but no evidence could be found to confirm that government forces systematically massacred civilians in the operation zone, nor that the number of civilians killed even remotely approached the number being cited in other reports being circulated internationally.

BUZENBERG: The House report says U.S. Embassy officials

never even reached the village where that massacre allegedly took place. In fact, Administration assurances, then, that Salvadoran authorities were taking disciplinary action against soldiers who abused human rights were not based on an independent study, but solely on statements by the Salvadoran Defense Ministry.

David Wise is an author and journalist who has reported extensively on intelligence matters, and he says that while the House report goes out of its way to praise most intelligence reporting, it is still devastating in its revelations about how Administration policies altered certain analyses.

DAID WISE: Theoretically, the CIA and other intelligence agencies are objective. But what is objectivity? They operate, as everyone does, in a political context, in a climate. And so the suspicion, although it's not stated explicitly in here, but the suspicion is that these agencies will tailor their policies, on the one hand, in 1980 to suit President Carter, and in 1982, on the other hand, to suit President Reagan. And when you tailor intelligence to policy, you're going to make misjudgments.

BUZENBERG: In short, bad or biased information may lead to the wrong policy decision. Wise says that may happen in Central America because of the Administration's policy emphasis, and hence the intelligence agencies' focus, on external support as the basis for revolution there, instead of looking at internal conditions.

The CIA and the State Department had no comment yesterday on the House report.